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Libby emerges stronger than ever

Libby is a community to be admired on many levels.

Once news of the asbestos contamination from the W.R. Grace vermiculite mine made national headlines five years ago, Libby residents had no choice but to work through the difficulties under the microscope of that media publicity.

There was confusion at first about how to address the many tentacles of the problem — cleanup issues, money issues, economic issues, health issues. Community leaders have acknowledged there were bumps along the way; not every problem tackled and every program begun went as smoothly as they'd have liked. But tangible progress has been made.

Several support programs are now in place for asbestos victims, such as the Asbestos Related Disease Network, Community Health Care, the Center for Asbestos Related Disease and the Technical Assistance Group. All of these groups and other organizations are safety nets for victims.

Cleanup of homes and yards is progressing under the watchful eye of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which has invested some \$90 million in Superfund money for Libby area asbestos cleanup. City and county officials

Inter Lake editorial

would like the cleanup to proceed at a quicker pace, but they acknowledge the magnitude of the undertaking and are patiently waiting for the day they can proclaim Libby one of the cleanest places in the country.

The public is already willing to invest in Libby again, as evidenced by the upswing in Libby area real estate. Realtors there are reporting one of the best markets in several years.

The Lincoln County Port Authority, created two years ago to be an economic development vehicle for the Stimson lumber mill site, is one of the most exciting projects happening in Libby. The port authority has already created more than 100 jobs on the 411-acre site, with the prospect of up to 150 more jobs created in the coming year.

Kootenai River Development Council is on the front line of business recruitment at the mill site, and executive director Paul Rumelhart noted how valuable it is to have the site as an asset. It was an economic blow to the community when Stimson closed, but it looks as though the port authority will be the mechanism to keep economic development thriving in Libby.

Another centerpiece of recent development is the Libby Memorial Gymnasium, which attracted 50,000 visitors last year for a variety of performing arts and community events. It's an attractive facility in the heart of Libby, and the town should be proud of it.

The Libby Research Center that will be attached to the CARD clinic is another exciting project in the works. There's been international interest in studying the unique and highly toxic tremolite asbestos found in Libby vermiculite, and clinic physicians anticipate medical professionals will come from far and wide to study the effects of Libby asbestos exposure and ultimately find ways of combating asbestos disease.

Libby and Lincoln County remain natural jewels in Northwestern Montana. The breathtaking Cabinet Mountains, the hunting, fishing and outdoor recreation are all assets that will continue to draw visitors and help the area thrive.

Libby's name will forever be bound to asbestos, and there will be serious health issues to deal with for many years as the long latency periods for asbestos exposure play out. But the day will come when it's in the past. Until then, it appears as if Libby folks are rising to the challenge with a glass-half-full attitude.